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U.S. Army Corps
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Fires and floods...what's next?

(Story on page 2.)

California's worst wildfi ignite best in emergency

Story and photos by Mike Tharp

Some of the worst wildfires in California history ignited some of the best in the Corps.

A dozen October/November blazes in five counties killed at least 22 people, burned more than 3,600 homes and 1,200 other structures and charred nearly 740,000 acres. Damage is estimated in the billions, and the cost of fighting the fires nudged $200 million.

Even as the stench of burnt aluminum, melted into teardrop-shaped puddles, still hung in the ash-laden air, South Pacific Division and other Corps workers streamed into the ravaged areas. As with other natural disasters, the Corps deployed Emergency Support Function (ESF) teams within hours of getting the call from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Ever since the Stafford Act was passed in 1988, the Corps has mobilized to provide public works and engineering support for lifesaving, life-protection and recovery after a major disaster. ESF teams already had dealt with hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, tornados, mudslides and other forest fires, so they segued into a well-ordered drill in California.

Part of the San Diego cleanup involved sorting through debris.

In this issue…

On the cover: ***Mark Wingate and Rick Castro of the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services among the damage of November's fires.***

res
y teams

Mark Wingate and Rick McElwain with Mickey McElwain's car after fire destroyed it and the post for his mailbox.

Mark Wingate examines the cooled run-off from a melted aluminum wheel

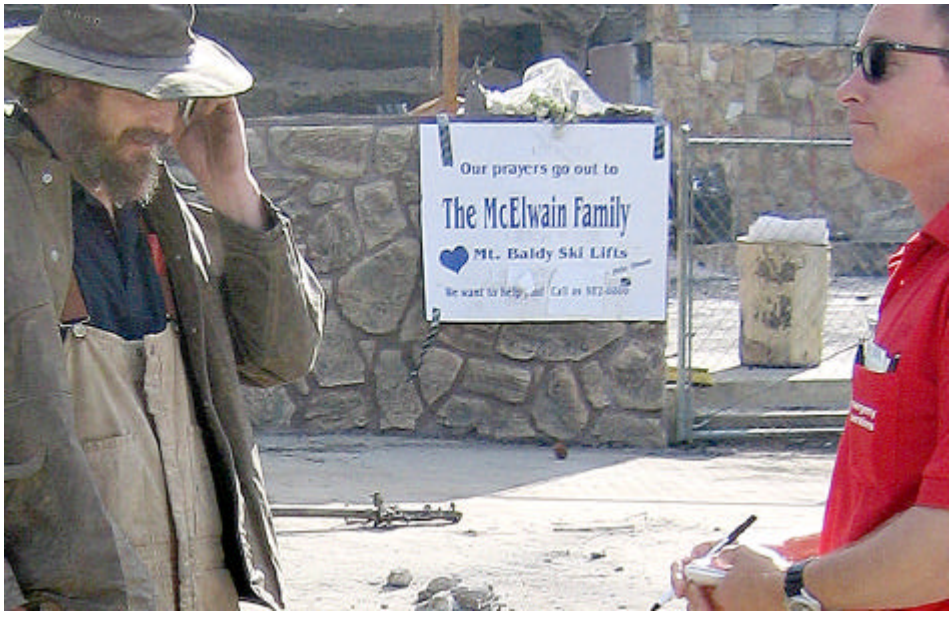
Kelley Aasen, team leader from the South Pacific Division in San Francisco, arrived at the makeshift emergency headquarters in Pasadena Oct. 29. For the next several weeks, the Corps veteran—who started responding to emergency sirens with the Loma Prieta Bay Area earthquake in 1989—took off only a handful of hours. Otherwise, he coordinated Corps efforts with those of other federal and state agencies. Somehow, rooted at one of three long tables facing three wall-sized maps, Aasen missed the glamour and glitz of being near Hollywood.

Coordination meant manning phones and laptops, attending limitless meetings, assessing what was being done and still needed to be done on the ground, sharing information among agencies and accompanying visiting VIPs on their rounds. Reporting that all was within normal limits, Aasen said the Corps efforts "help a lot of people. If we're called out, all resources are pulled toward the response."

Unlike more all-encompassing natural disasters such as hurricanes, these wildfires didn't require the full-court press of a major Corps mission that can last for months. The Division's strategy was focused on five main jobs: debris management, temporary housing, geographic information systems (GIS), a deployable tactical operations center and technical assistance. And although by mid-November most of the wildfires were extinguished or under control, team members then had to contend with the inevitable ripple effects from fire-scoured hills and mountains—mudslides after heavy rains and debris runoff clogging flood control basins. Luckily, thunderstorms the first week of November didn't cause either, but L.A. District Emergency Ops Branch chief Ed Andrews was ready. "The District's history of responding to disasters is good," the recent returnee from Iraq said. "We've done it before, and our Crisis Management Team is meeting every day in anticipation of us being asked for assistance."

Andrews noted that his counterpart from San Francisco, Duke Roberts, came down to help, and Andrews linked the multi-district approach to USACE 2012: "You pull folks in where needed and strengthen what you've got, especially in emergency situations. The Corps is very good at that."

A look at what emergency team members did on the scorched earth of the Golden State illustrates their wide-ranging contributions to relief and recovery efforts.



Mark Wingate's middle name is Edward, but it just as easily could be "Debris." The 11-year Corps veteran, disaster program manager for the Division and a debris subject matter expert, has dealt with more junk, refuse and rubbish than Sanford & Son. It's probably an exaggeration to declare, paraphrasing the Robert Duvall colonel in "Apocalypse

Mark Wingate listens to Rick McElwain after the destruction of Wingate's parents' home.

Mark Wingate of the District Emergency Support Function team and Rick Castro of the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services discuss how to best help Fred Turnbull and Girija Karamcheti after their home in Palmer Canyon was destroyed by last year's wildfires.

Now," that Wingate loves the smell of debris in the morning. But he did extend—by five months—a post-hurricane tour in St. Thomas overseeing the noxious Bovoni Landfill. "Once someone started a fire in the middle of the night in the car pile," he recalled. "There must have been five different colors of smoke. In the end about 50 people went to the hospital, and I was one of them."

Besides his ground-zero work after several hurricanes, Wingate also negotiated minefields driving downrange throughout Bosnia and Croatia to assess hazardous material storage and to oversee cleanups in base camps in 1996-97; conducted structural safety assessments after the 1994 Northridge Earthquake; and literally tunneled his way beneath the ruins of the World Trade Center to inspect a shaky subterranean wall in 2001.

After the recent wildfires, he and his fellow experts Beau Hanna and Eddie Sosebee, from Mobile District, estimated the volume of debris at 350,000 cubic yards—well below the 20 million cubic yards left by Hurricane Andrew or the 6 million from Georges, but enough to warrant the Corps' expertise. They categorized debris into recyclable metal, metal appliances, household hazardous waste, construction and demolition debris. The litany of burned-up stuff resembled Johnny Cash's auctioneer-like list of cities in "I've Been Everywhere": ash, partially standing masonry/stucco walls, concrete, appliances, loose masonry/tile, metal framing, metal furniture, power poles, partially burned trees and automobiles. One of those automobiles, seared down to its rims and chassis, sat on the shoulder of Mountain Avenue near San Antonio Dam, a casualty of the Padua fire.

Wingate, Rick Castro of the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services and Michael Raphael of FEMA/Homeland Security stopped to speak with Rick McElwain. The 40-year-old Flagstaff, Ariz., resident had been manning a bulldozer to clean up the remains of his parents' house, demolished by the same 200-foot-wide tornado of fire that engulfed McElwain's brother Mickey in what was once a Nissan. Mickey was now in the Arrowhead Regional Medical Center with burns over 80 percent of his body.

"One thing that's holding me up is there's no place to take this debris," Rick said, waving toward a pile he had bladed together. Later, as they drove to another site, Wingate reflected: "I just can't say enough good about that guy because he's doing it right. That's a perfect example of getting your debris to the right-of-way to implement a roadside pickup."

A few miles northwest, all that was left of most of the 70-year-old homes in Palmer Canyon were stone chimneys jutting to the sky, a barbecue grill itself grilled, a statue of two lovers blackened like shadows. At what used to be the two-bedroom home of Fred Turnbull and Girija Karamcheti, Wingate said, "We're sorry about your

T. Pete Thompson points out a possible site for temporary housing to Jesus Rios, maintenance manager for a local real estate firm.

house," then listened as the couple described what happened and outlined their plans. "Clearly this canyon would be a lot safer if this road could be widened and some of those trees thinned," said Turnbull. Wingate peered up at some of the singed and teetering eucalyptus. "The criterion for eligible debris is imminent threat to the public—and that's an imminent threat," he said.

Some 40 miles east of there, at Big Bear and Lake Arrowhead—two of the state's most popular mountain resorts—another ESF member was on a quixotic quest for flat land. T. Pete Thompson, with Omaha District but based at Fort Carson, Colo., formed part of the temporary housing team, along with Jack Rose, Alan Ruff and Kim Mulhern.

His mission, which took him through several mile-high cauterized communities: Find level lots to put travel trailers for fire victims unable to get their own interim living quarters while their homes were being rebuilt or before they relocated.

Consulting maps and Web site printouts of mobile home companies in the area, the former Army major flourished his "get-out-of-jail" FEMA sign to pass through police barricades still keeping out the public. On State Highway 189 near Lake Arrowhead, he visited Blue Jay Village Co. and spoke with general manager Michele Nadler about possible sites. Nadler asked maintenance manager Jesus Rios to show Thompson unoccupied land above one of the firm's trailer parks, and Rios bounced the native Arkansan in his 4-wheel-drive Ford 350 up the ridge. Walking through undamaged cedars, Thompson said, "I think this is too steep" for mobile homes, but thanked Nadler on his way to the next location. Which was a gravel-topped landfill. Thompson got out and photographed the area, wondering aloud whether contamination would preclude its use. Then on to Lakeside Trailer Park where manager Nick Fogg told him he had "only one other space left—the rest are torn up, dug up, putting in water lines." But he referred Thompson, unfailingly polite to everyone he met, to another trailer park called the Valley of Enchantment.

There Thompson, a veteran of several hurricane and earthquake recoveries, conferred with managers Bob and Rose Melis. "I'm on the primary response team for temporary housing," he said. "I'm here to assess the need for temporary housing for people displaced by this disaster." The couple said they had six spaces available with more vacancies opening up in a few weeks. They also said they required credit checks for residents. Thompson suppressed a smile. "I think if FEMA is paying the bill, their credit is pretty good," he said. "I don't think they need a credit check."

Rick Castro and Mark Wingate discuss debris removal. (See following related story.)

Later, visiting Old Waterman Canyon where numerous houses were destroyed, Thompson shook his head at a scene that could have come from "Blade Runner." The terrain was just too rugged to place a trailer next to a home while it was being repaired or rebuilt. As a UH-1 helicopter dangling two utility poles rotored overhead, Thompson, who has coached his three developmentally disabled sons to Special Olympics medals, described his method of operating in disaster areas: "You feel for them, but you've got a mission and have to focus on your mission," he explained. "Emotion has to take a back seat. You're too busy reading the road and working your 12-to-14 hour days."

"Without geography, you're nowhere," says the Caribbean philosopher Jimmy Buffett, and Doug Swanson, a geographer from Portland District, would agree. Swanson and his colleagues, Kathleen Bergman from L. A. District's Arizona office and Steve Long from Philadelphia District, jetted into SoCal soon after the word went out that Corps emergency crews were needed.

And were they ever. Within two weeks the GIS specialists had fielded and met more than 600 requests for cartographic products. Need to know where Red Cross shelters are each day? The GIS team provided maps to help residents find temporary refuge from evacuated areas. Want to identify potential flood areas affecting American Indian lands? They plotted them in less than a day.

Where are the ethnicity and foreign language areas in the region so aid workers can identify their various requirements? GIS produced. Crucially, the team also acquired and distributed flood plain, slope and elevation data to emergency response workers so they'd be better prepared for possible mud and debris flows following rainfall in burn areas.

Swanson recalled another request: "'Show me all the roads leading to the fire areas, paved with asphalt, wide enough for a fire truck with no bridge overhang lower than 12 feet.' We use satellite data, aerial photography and now the Predator (drone aircraft)" when cloud cover or smoke prevents safe manned flights, he explained. "We even considered using the U2 (the famous high-flying spy plane)," the Air Force veteran said.

If seeing is vital for Corps and other emergency crews, talking and listening are too. That's why the Division dispatched its version of the Batmobile—Emergency Command and Control Vehicle #3—from Sacramento District. Within two days of deployment, the vehicle—one of only six available nationwide—was sending and receiving from Harbison Canyon in San Diego County. Wildfires had roared through the canyon, destroying homes and knocking out all phone communications.

The 36-foot-long rig on an International Harvester chassis was anchored at a community center and immediately began providing electric power and communications through telephone and data lines.

"We were using the satellite dish to capture the signal, hooked to a satellite, linked back to a satellite provider in Virginia," said Gary Fong, a 30-year-Corps veteran and team leader of the Deployable Tactical Operations Center. He estimated that the EECV hooked up 200 people in 10 days with phone, Internet, hand-held radio and other commo. "We support FEMA every way we can," he said. "There were no glitches."

Joan Didion, the famous California writer, once wrote: "Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse…. The winds show us how close to the edge we are."

With their work on the wildfires, the women and men of the Corps emergency teams helped a lot of Californians pull back from the edge.

South Pacific Division debris expert Mark Wingate speaks with Girija Karamcheti and California Governor's Office of Emergency Services Rick Castro in devastated Palmer Canyon.

Green muck complicated cleanup of Badger Basin.

District pulls the plug in debris basins

Story and photos by Mike Tharp

Here's how the Corps keeps Californians from drowning.

With 10-wheeled dump trucks, 54-ton bulldozers, three-story-high excavators and a rowboat.

With people who were at work from O-dark-30 till Letterman and Leno did their stand-ups, who missed every pro football playoff game on TV, who crossed federal, state, county and city boundaries to get money fast and spend it well.

And with planning and preparation and persistence.

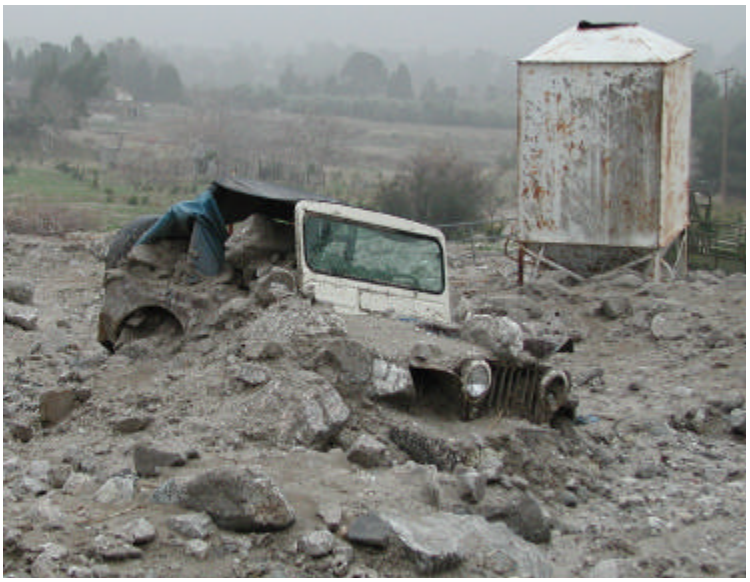
At stake were lives. A Christmas Day downpour, following Armageddon-like forest fires, swept down naked hillsides stripped by flames of all erosion-resistant grass, shrubs and trees. Mud flowing like cold lava and VW-sized boulders surged out of the San Gabriel Mountains, killing at least 16, including several campers at a Christian retreat.

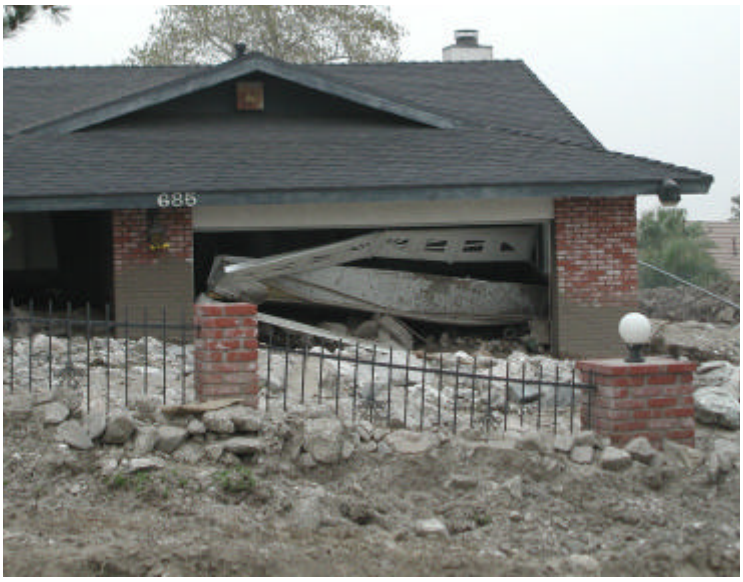
Al Quintero (far right) shows routes to disposal sites.

"I got a call Dec. 26 from the California Dept. of Water Resources saying the county (San Bernardino) required assistance from the state," recalls L.A. District Emergency Operations Branch Chief Ed Andrews. "But the state wasn't in a position to help, so they were coming to the Corps."

The result was a month-long 24/7 frenzy of activity to remove debris from dozens of flood-control basins at the foot on the mountains. The Corps' cleanup effort bookended its widely heralded relief and recovery operations during and after the devastating autumn fires in five southern California counties. Says Ken Miller, director of public works for San Bernardino County: "This cleanout is really helping us to minimize the risk to our communities. The remarkable effort of the Corps staff was spectacular, that within a only a Friday-to-Monday period, work started on the cleanup."

To visualize what the Los Angeles District and South Pacific Division team members and Corps private contractors did, imagine the flood-control basins as a series of 33 lagoons necklaced at regular intervals along the base of the San Gabriel mountain range. From the bottom of the mountains to their top, most of the watershed had been burned off. Stretching 35 miles east to west, the mountains lay denuded of natural barriers to slow or stop downrushing water.





By Ed Amdrews

Damages such as those shown above can happen when debris basins are clogged and overflowing during torrential rain storms.

When the Christmas rains came, those basins/ lagoons quickly filled with all the flotsam and jetsam nature could conjure—silt, gravel, rocks, limbs, leaves—tumbled into a deadly brown gumbo. The muck clogged the holes through which water normally flows from the holding basins into concrete channels that function like capillaries, funneling the runoff into reservoirs, irrigation ponds or, ultimately, the ocean.

That meant unless the holes were unstopped, the basins would become engineering turncoats, not preventing floods but fomenting them. Meteorologists forecast another winter storm soon. A threat had become an emergency.

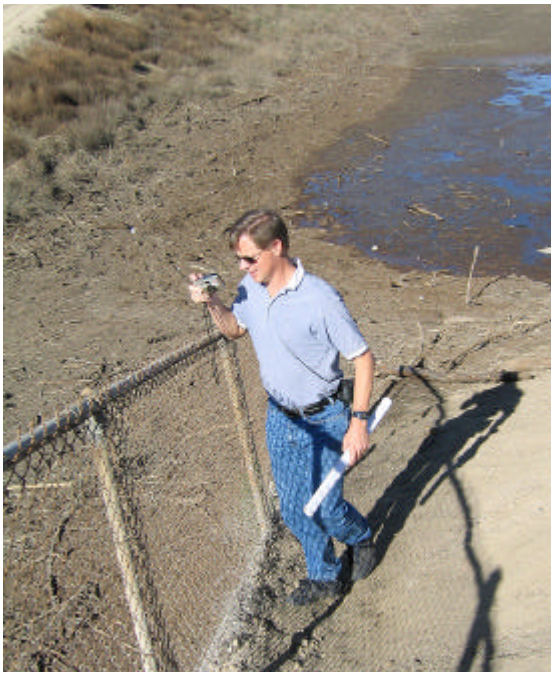
"The Christmas Day mudslides and resulting loss of life have shown that a much larger effort beyond local and state resources is needed," Linda Adams, director of the state Dept. of Water Resources, wrote to District Commander COL Richard G. Thompson on Dec. 28. "To prevent widespread flooding and loss of life and property, it is critical to clear the San Bernardino County debris basins…Therefore, I am requesting the technical and direct assistance of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers…."

Cavalry bugles didn't quite crescendo, and COL Thompson didn't quite mount up and yell "Yo!" But District team members weren't unprepared. Even as the fires were burning last fall, Andrews and others knew full well what the fires would do to the hillsides and what the hillsides would then do to the basins. In fact, before the fires were finally snuffed out, Division and District specialists had game-planned their options and strategies for mudslides.

When the earth moved, so did the Corps. More than manpower, more than machinery, the immediate need was money. Money so contractors could bid on the jobs and be paid for their work.

On Dec. 27, in an anxious series of phone calls, e-mails and a teleconference among COL Thompson visiting in D.C. and his crisis management team in L.A.—a process that amazed even Corps veterans with its speed--$4.5 million in federal funds was authorized for the cleanup. That momentum was never relinquished, and by 9 p.m. on the day the funding was approved, contractors appeared at the basins, gauging what needed to be done. "The county was stunned and absolutely delighted that we pushed ahead so quickly," Andrews says, "and the state was as well."

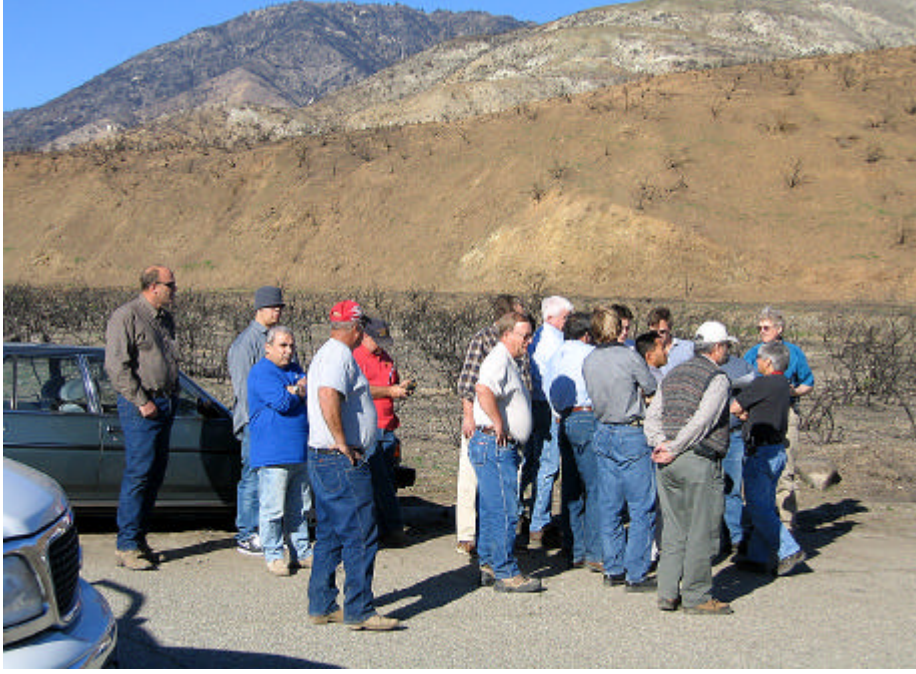
In short order, bids were let, approved and the first cleanup began. But the lightning round wasn't over. On Jan. 5, USACE headquarters authorized another $5 million for the second cleanup phase. The Division and District now had $9.5 million to spend on making southern Californians safer.



Doug Youngdak of RQ Construction, San Diego, records Patton Basin's vital stats for his firm's bid.

What happened on Jan. 14--when some 20 bidders toured six gorged debris basins with District team members--and on Jan. 16--when contractors under the watchful eyes of other District experts did the dirty work of cleaning basins--dramatically illustrated how federal folks leapt to help the people whose taxes pay their salaries.

On Jan. 14, across from the San Manuel Indian Casino in Highland, Calif., the District's Paul Apodaca, Terry King, Al Quintero and Joe Flynn met contractors at Patton Basin. All the contractors were certified MATOC (Multiple Award Task Order Contracts), a select group prequalified to bid on projects over a set period.



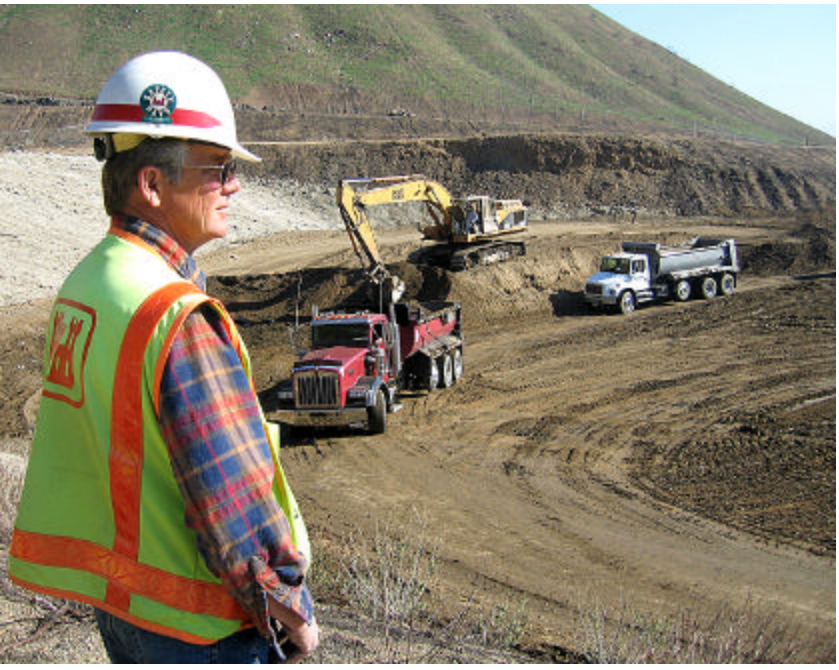
Contractors and Corps guides survey a disposal site.

Patton would be the first of six flood control basins they'd visit that day and eyeball to determine their bids. Maintaining the District's extraordinary pace, they would submit their bids by 1 p.m. the next day, and contracts would be awarded four hours later. On Saturday, two working days after seeing the basins, the contractors would mobilize at the sites.

"The project duration is 20 days," King told them at Patton Basin. "The important part of the job is to get this material out as quickly as possible. We want you to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week—and we don't think that's unreasonable."

Manning video and digital cameras, the contractors walked to the basin's dike. Doug Youngdak of RQ Construction Inc., San Diego, viewed the work as "simple" and said he was there to "figure out the access and any unknown risks." Rick Garcia, of Straub Construction Inc., Bonsall, Calif., was looking for "the nearest utilities and the nearest dump site to determine your return times, gradients, vegetation, any existing hazards, environmentally protected areas and animal habitat."

At Devil's Basins 1, 2 and 3, as a covey of quail exploded from the roadside, King told the men, "We're trying to be fair and measure what you take out and pay you for it." Vern Thomas of Earthtech in Long Beach, observed that "it's gotta get done, no question about it. They're full and there's gonna be a bunch more (rain) coming."



Tom Pagiegal at a nearly finished cleanup site in San Antonio Heights.

After looking at a dump site, the contractors' convoy rolled up to Badger's Basin. As Lawrence-of-Arabia winds and dust devils whipped around the group, they hiked to the end of the basin where greenish tapioca-like mud had congealed. "You gotta get the water to get this stuff out," said Joe Flynn, "so you might as well use it as dust control (on the dirt road)." One by one, the contractors headed off to mull over their bids and the job of work ahead.

(On Friday, Jan. 16, Straub got the contract award of $943,704.)

Two days later, heavy equipment from Pomona's Miramar Construction and its subcontractors, Reyes Construction Inc. and Ecco Equipment Inc., as well as Thomas Land Clearing Co., Long Beach, yet another contractor, beavered away at cleanup work. They used machines straight out of Terminator movies: 54-ton D9 bulldozers with tiltable blades to shove the muck into disposable mounds; dump trucks with 10 wheels for torque and traction; mantis-like excavators whose metal jaws could reach 33 feet in the air as they loaded the trucks. Their round-

the-clock schedule meant they could clear 20,000 cubic yards in 900 loads a day from the basins.

Like a circuit-riding frontier judge, Tom Pagiegal, a District construction rep, drove from basin to basin in his white Expedition, checking for progress and problems. To date, it has been nearly all progress. At Deer Creek Basin north of Rancho Cucamonga, Pagiegal met Jaime Pinedo, president of Miramar, and his associate, John King. Miramar got the job—which involves digging out 500,000 cubic yards of material—the night of the same day the Corps called them to inspect the site. "It was good to get the call," Pinedo said. "It will make us a stronger contractor to respond even faster next time."

A few miles farther west, the three men rendezvoused at the Mother of All Basins, Rancho Cucamonga, with Will Gonzales, a Reyes superintendent. The basin has a capacity of 1 million cubic yards, and when Gonzales and his crew first showed up, the whole alluvial plain was underwater—a sure sign drainage holes weren't open. The first order of business was to unclog a concrete tower, called an energy dissipator, which literally takes the energy out of rampaging water through vertical portals and spreads it into drainage channels.

Gonzales didn't know how deep the standing water was, so he requisitioned a 14-foot metal rowboat, christened the "SS Miramar," and paddled out to the tower. Using the oars like wooden Q-tips, he reopened the dissipator's sclerotic arteries, and Whoooosh! currents began to flow into the channel. "The tower was jammed with branches, leaves--almost like fertilizer," Gonzales recalled. "We just rowed out there and unplugged the windows with the oar."

All three contractors and Pagiegal, a native Philadelphian, are football fans, but the basin work took priority, and none of them saw any January NFL playoff games. In order for heavy equipment to reach the tower and finish removing debris, for instance, it took 16 hours to build a crude road—all night and part of the next day, King related. "We've got two more weeks to remove all the silt from around the tower," he added. "We hope to finish before the Super Bowl."

Marlowe Kulseth, a construction rep from the District's Tucson office, was also on scene and, like Pagiegal, rotated from site to site. As the men stood on the dam between the basin and the nearby disposal site, they quietly marveled at their luck with the weather. Despite the dire forecasts, no more rain had fallen since Christmas, and the basin cleanup was proceeding ahead of schedule.

The giant machines growled as they spooned up the chocolate-colored mud and dumped it into the truck beds. A swampy odor rose along with an improbable flock of seagulls drawn by the prospect of chow churned up by the blades and wheels. As the trucks circled in an endless daisy chain of loading and dumping, Gonzales noted that the debris was mercifully drying out. "I'd figured it would be soup," he said.

At the same time, near 8,600-foot Mt. Baldy, six flood control basins were also being cleared at upscale San Antonio Heights. Some of the basins nudged million-dollar homes, and one of Pagiegal's duties had been to explain to residents the need for all the noise and activity. The cleanup was nearly finished, and Pagiegal got out of his rig to check with Ron Thompson, a superintendent with Thomas Land Clearing. "We're going to have a street sweeper and water truck out here tomorrow," Thompson said. "It's done. Stick a fork in it."

[***Editor's note:*** Besides the District and Division team members mentioned in this article, the following team members also contributed in major ways to the San Bernardino cleanup: Roger Berg, Barbara Cover Spear, Ken Krob, Richard Marmolejo, Melvin Prioleau, Larry Romero, Jesse Schlunegger and Greg Scovell in the field; George Beams, Bob Copeland, Joe Evelyn, Art Jung, Robert Kwang, Dan McKercher and many others in the District, South Pacific Division and USACE HQ.]

Rancho Cucamonga Basin several days after water was drained into channels.

Regulatory slows possible flood damage to a trickle

By Mark Cohen

Over the last two months the Los Angeles District Corps of Engineers Regulatory Branch has worked overtime to help prepare southern California for potentially devastating flooding. The wildfires that struck the region in the fall left thousands of acres barren. Without attendant plants and trees to stabilize slopes and slow water flow, excessive rains would cause runoff with high sediment loads and untold damage to lives and property.

The Regulatory Branch has jurisdiction over "waters of the United States" and regulates certain activities within that jurisdiction. The Branch is charged with protection of the physical, biological, and chemical integrity of these waters. In doing so, the Branch regulates activities that might impact the integrity of waters, such as bank stabilization or channel construction.

The Branch began action in November while the fires were still smoldering. The Regulatory Branch's North Coast Section issued an Emergency Regional General Permit, also known as RGP 63, to Caltrans to undertake limited culvert and channel clearing downstream of burn areas in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. RGP 63 provides for an expedited permit application review process, including interagency notification. The permit was issued one day after the application's receipt.

In late December, Caltrans requested another RGP 63 to undertake limited bank stabilization work, again in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. Since the fires, Caltrans had undertaken an extensive review of the watershed to pinpoint problem areas within channels that could lead to bank failure and road damage. Road damage in turn could endanger lives and inhibit the ability of public agencies to respond to an emergency. The work was considered an emergency because of predicted imminent rains.

December was also a busy month for the Regulatory Branch's South Coast Section. Project managers Dan Swenson and Robert Smith issued dozens of expedited and emergency permits to clean out creeks and basins in San Bernardino County. The permits were issued to the County to increase the capacity of its channels and flood control facilities.

"I'm glad we issued the permits when we did," said Swenson. "Hopefully, our work helped avoid needless tragedy."

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